

Abe Baker-Butler, NY – 2019

Early on March 2, I boarded a train for a week in Washington, D.C. as a delegate to the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP). I was on my way to spend a week learning about civic and political engagement with 103 other 17 and 18 year-olds, many of whom came from places and backgrounds wildly different than my own. Generously sponsored by the Hearst Foundations in collaboration with the U.S. Senate, USSYP would prove to be an unforgettable experience.

On the train to Washington, I was excited and nervous. How would the experience transform me? From Alaska's Avram Salzman to Hawaii's Zane Yamamoto, the delegates literally ran the gamut from A to Z. The first night, I had a conversation with a delegate about supply-side economics. She articulated a perspective I had rarely heard: the government should not regulate the economy, but should instead let market forces work unaltered. I disagreed. We talked on and on, passionately but respectfully. This was the first of many conversations that would challenge my views.

Sunday brought more excitement: conversations about Israel, Brexit, populism, and austerity, as well as discussions of salmon fishing, gender pronouns, Colin Kaepernick, and a lecture from Jack Warren, the executive director of the Society of the Cincinnati, who framed the American Revolution for me in a totally new way. Although our Founding Fathers were flawed, he posited, the principles and ideals they dictated, even if unrealized in their lifetimes, are applicable to everyone. He spoke persuasively and passionately, in a way I had never experienced, about how our responsibility is to fully realize the ideals of the American Revolution.

Monday's agenda included conversations with political luminaries, including the Senate parliamentarian and historian, and U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John G. Roberts. I learned about the validity of multiple judicial perspectives and the ways in which judges maintain cordiality in our current environment of hyper-partisanship. I also spoke with a North Dakota delegate, the only Democrat in her school of about 100 students. She told me she gets a lot of hate for it, as well as for her ambitions to leave the state. Nearly everyone in her town, she said, plans to stay and become a farmer and they shun those who are liberal or leave the state. I debated with Illinois and Nevada delegates about the #MeToo movement and where to draw the line between presumed innocence and guilt. Not surprisingly, it was an extremely dynamic conversation without easy answers. I also met a delegate from Colorado whose family had a proud tradition of hunting, but was still in favor of common-sense gun safety measures.

On Tuesday, we participated in a diplomatic simulation at the State Department, which provided tremendous insight into the complexity of America's diplomatic operations and illustrated how easily tense dialogue can devolve into armed conflict. To top it off, we had the unforgettable experience of dining in the Benjamin Franklin Dining Room, which resembled the Palace of Versailles, with Secretary Mike Pompeo.

I also had the opportunity to meet the National Archivist, David Ferriero. Touring the National Archives, it was awe-inspiring to read the original Constitution and Declaration of Independence. During dinner, I engaged in intense conversation with other delegates on gun safety, a topic about which I am extremely passionate. What was remarkable to me about this conversation is that these other delegates presented the counterargument to

my views in a way I had never previously considered. I felt challenged, yet I was struck by the civility and vibrance of our dialogue.

Later in the week, we toured the White House. I learned that *The Art of the Deal* is not in the White House Library, and had the opportunity to explore the East Room, Movie Theater, the China Room, and more. I even had the opportunity to meet the president and White House Counselor Kellyanne Conway.

We also participated in a C-SPAN televised student town hall, as well as a meeting with Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, four star General Paul J. Selva. General Selva's thoughtful responses to our questions about national security policy were impressive and made me feel our national security was in good hands. However, what I found most remarkable about his speech were his comments on work-life balance: he told us he plays guitar for an hour every night, and that no matter how high the rank or career success we achieve, we should always include an activity in our daily routine that is relaxing and enjoyable.

The advice I received from the many thinkers and leaders who spent time with our group is invaluable. My week in Washington showed me that to be an effective leader, I will need a firm grasp of history and strong personal principles. The political and civic leaders who spoke to our group advised us to find a career we love and a way to unwind to succeed in life. They emphasized the importance of spending time with family, regardless of professional ambition. They told us not to fear debate or compromise, but to use these to our advantage by growing and learning from our colleagues' ideas. They implored us to be decisive, take prudent risks, and dedicate our careers to a positive cause larger than ourselves. Whether in local politics on zoning or the national debate on gun control, the lessons articulated by these leaders of our democracy have relevance for everyone.

When I traveled back home one week after my departure, I knew I had only begun to understand the ways in which USSYP would affect me. My interactions with the other delegates showed me that civil dialogue is still alive and that diversity truly is a strength, not a weakness. They made me optimistic for the future of civil discourse and progress in our democracy as we respectfully and productively delved deep into the major issues facing society. Most significantly, my USSYP experience gave me hope that collaboration and compromise will prevail over America's current divisions -- and that I can play a role in making that our generation's reality.